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## The More Important Things

ROHINTON MISTRY

THE LARGER ROUND BISCUIT TIN was deep, and full of marbles. I slid my hand softly into it. They trickled over my fingers. It was like water without wet. A quiet splashing, clinkling sound. But if the hand moved too much or suddenly, then the marbles rattled against the side of the tin, and the sound was like money, and louder.

My father made that noise when he came home from tuning pianos and dropped his change in his old tin. That sound was not nice. The tin said Panama Cigarettes, and was rusted. The sound was clanky and harsh, the way my father spoke whenever his breath smelled of that thing called *feni*, which he drank next door till late at night with Lancelot Braganza. But sometimes, even the money sound was not bad if he came home early. The best days were when he bought *The Illustrated Weekly of India* and sat to read it; now and then he stopped to tell us interesting things from it.

The tin used to be new and shiny. Once, when I had nothing to do, I took a piece of sandpaper and removed all the rust, but in a few days the brown coating had come back. My father said this was because the tin was not galvanized, since cigarette tins were meant to be thrown away when they were empty, though when he was a child he had watched his father (Tony, I am talking about your grandfather, he explained) save his loose change in a cigarette tin too, and if it was good enough for Grandpa DeCosta, it was good enough for Desmond DeCosta; and who had the money to afford anything fancier?

I knew what galvanized meant. It was named after Luigi Galvani. I had learned it in my General Science class. The Science master, Mr. Lalvani, had made a joke: 'Remember that name, it rhymes with mine. Only one important difference which no one must forget: Luigi was Italian, I am Punjabi.'



Punjab was in the north, very far from Bombay. It used to be one big state, and then the Hindus and Sikhs were fighting, so in November 1966, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi divided it into two, Haryana for Hindus and Punjab for Sikhs, said the Social Science teacher.

Mr. Lalvani did not wear a turban. He had no beard either. So he must be Hindu. But then why did he say, I am Punjabi? It was very confusing. The Social Studies teacher did not explain that. Maybe that's why my father used to say that education today was hopeless.

I wondered if they played marbles in Punjab and Haryana. Punjab and Haryana, and Himachal Pradesh, were the northernmost states, next to Kashmir, said the teacher. Very cold, and it even snowed there. Just like a foreign country. They could not play marbles on snow. My mother's sister lived in Himachal Pradesh. My auntie. She had two sons, and they were my cousins, but I had never met them because they lived so far away. It took two days and nights on the train to get there, and it was very expensive. There was a photograph in which they were wearing woollen caps and scarves and sweaters, just like a foreign country.

I moved my fingers slowly, and the marbles rolled and trickled over them. One fell out. I picked it up. Its colour was exactly like the uniform that the *jawans* of the Indian Army wore.

When India and China were having a war, everyone was worried for auntie and her family, because they were so close to the frontier, and the newspaper said that the Chinese hordes were simply pouring in. All the papers said India had tried for peace, and would keep on trying; slogans like 'Hindi-Chinee *bhai-bhai*' were popular at first, but if the Chinese did not want to be brothers with us, Pandit Nehru said, '*Dushman ko hata doe.*' That was what the Indian Army was doing, removing the enemy, although the Chinese hordes were simply pouring in anyway.

I wriggled my fingers gently inside the tin again. The marbles moved and rolled and plashed, like glassy, magical, colourful water. If someone was watching, they would think I was silly. But they did not know what was in my mind. It was my colourful galaxy. The galaxy was made up of countless solar systems, and each solar system had a sun at the centre which was really a huge, huge bright star, and the planets moved around it, and in our solar system there were nine planets whose names were Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune and Pluto.

The marbles made me forget about the other things I wanted, and did not have, like a drawer in my father's big black desk where Edwin and Alice each had one, an electric torch, a Meccano set, a bicycle. It was better to forget about these things, because I would never get them. But sometimes it also felt exciting to dream and make plans about what I would do with them if I did.

Except for the marbles, everything I had used to belong to Edwin or



Alice. My father and mother said there was not enough money to buy new things for everyone. But last year on my birthday I got a new school uniform. I was eight years old. Eight complete, and running nine. Why running? If it was, why did it not come sooner than the previous one? It was just a way of talking. Maybe for Mr. Lalvani too it was just a way of talking when he said, I am Punjabi, even though he had no turban or beard.

Edwin's old uniforms lasted a long time. But my father said they were a gone case now. The collars had been reversed once, and now even the other side was torn. The white stuff inside, which used to make the collar stiff and poke into your neck but later became soft after it had been washed many times, was falling out. And the seats of the short pants had holes in them. My mother tried very hard to save them. 'Go to sleep now, Maria,' my father said, 'or you will go blind.' But she sat up late, trying to mend the collars and seats, while he went to bed. She kept moving the cloth and touching her spectacles. First she brought the collar very close to her face, then moved it back a little, then brought it close again. 'My number has changed,' she said, 'but when the wedding season is going strong again, there will be a big demand for bands. They will need their pianos tuned.' She gave the needle and thread to me. 'Then Desmond will earn a bit more and I can buy new ones.' I licked the thread to make it stiff, and put it through the hole in one shot.

I wished she would stop and go to bed. She removed her glasses, rubbed her eyes, and wore them again. I wondered if the clothes would look okay when she finished. The teachers in my school, especially the Fathers, were very strict about uniforms. Some of them were really mean, they called you to the front of the class and embarrassed you: 'What is your excuse? *Dhobi* did not wash your new uniform on time?' They would look at the boys sitting quietly, some of whom would laugh nervously because their own uniforms were also shabby. 'If you are going to dress like a *ghati*, better go to some municipal school, don't come here.' Then there was more laughing.

Alice was lucky. She never had to wear anyone's old uniforms. Sometimes, my father said that three boys would have been so much easier with clothes, the way it was with textbooks.

My Radiant Reader had several names inside the cover. The first one was Ramesh Chopra. Whoever he was, his parents must have been rich, to buy a brand new textbook. Ramesh Chopra had been cancelled and Edwin DeCosta was written instead. Then Alice below Edwin, and finally Tony. It was the same with the other textbooks, except for the first name. In my history book, the list started with Iqbal Mohammed, and the arithmetic text was Jasbir Singh's. The ghosts of these strangers were inside the textbooks too, they could not be left behind just by turning the cover. On some pages, paragraphs were underlined, with notations in the margin, such as 'imp.'



or 'v. imp.' or 'learn by heart' or 'sure for final exam'. Sometimes, large sections had a curly bracket that said 'omit' or 'not imp.'

These people were still living inside my books, telling me what to read and what to skip, and my eyes obeyed even though I did not really want to. Reading the books of strangers made me feel that I was the real stranger. The books also had different smells from different school bags in which they had lain for a year at a time. It took a while before those odours were replaced by the omelet sandwich and Britannia Marie Biscuit smell of my own bag.

But my poetry book was different. I liked it from the very beginning. There were not many markings in it, and the smell was nice. It was soothing, like some of the poems in the book. Maybe it was reading those poems that made me imagine the soothing smell. The poem I liked best was about Winkyn, Blinkyn and Nod. Or Wynkin, Blynkin and Nod. The spelling was tricky. When I got wet in the rain sometimes, and then came home and dried myself with a towel and put on dry clothes, I felt like Winkyn, Blinkyn and Nod. The best part was taking off the shoes and turning them upside down so all the water ran out, and the socks, which I squeezed till more water ran. The greater the quantity of water, the more heroic I felt for having survived the storm. Then I rubbed my feet with the towel and put on my slippers.

That poem always made me warm, especially if I read it in bed. And the marbles did the same thing. In my friends' hands at school they were dull and ordinary. But something happened after I brought them home and washed and wiped them. It was almost magical. Though books were not, marbles were like money, because when beggars got money, it became their own, even if it used to belong to a *lakhpati* with six cars.

I never begged for marbles, though. My friends in school gave them to me. They said I brought them good luck. It started one day when I was just standing and watching. It was a game of Triangles, and there were lots of marbles inside the triangle. The winner would take them all. It was scratched in the dirt of the playground. It should have been an equilateral triangle but was not, because in an equilateral triangle the three sides had to be of equal length, and all three angles were sixty degrees each, and the sum of the angles of any triangle added up to one hundred and eighty degrees.

That day I had ten paise. For ten paise you could purchase one large shooter marble and five small ones for betting. Patla Babu and Jhaaria Babu sold them near the school gate. Sometimes Patla squeezed your bum and then gave you one more, free.

But I did not buy them. These fellows were all experts, and I had never played before, ever. Trying new things scared me. I just stood and



watched. Then one of them asked if I would hold his extra marbles that were not inside the triangle. His name was Dilip and he was in my class, so I said okay, and soon he won the game. He was very pleased, and gave seven to me as a gift. 'You brought me good luck, *yaar*,' he said.

The next day, I was again just watching when Dilip repeated his request. He gave me ten marbles after winning this time, and called it *baksheesh*. I think using that word made him feel like a grownup. We made a deal: ten everyday for me if I stood and helped him during short recess and long recess.

My mother gave *baksheesh* to the sweeper on Christmas. She used to give fifty paise, but then the government did devaluation, and everything cost more, so after that she gave one rupee. The sweeper never made mistakes about *baksheesh*. On Christmas he went to Christian homes, and on Diwali to Hindus. For Pateti, he went to Parsis because they were celebrating their new year. The sweeper knew all the festivals.

The short recess was only twenty minutes long. The whole of it went in going to the bathroom. There was a Hindi master who terrorized us. He threatened that he would 'beat you till you do *peshaab* in your *puttaloona* if you misbehave.' No one believed this. Then one day we saw the Hindi master slap a boy, who did wet his pants. When we asked the boy later, he said it was almost automatic, that as soon as the Hindi master raised his hand the piss came out. A few drops first, then the whole stream.

So I always wanted to be sure that I was never full. The bathroom was at the back of the school. There was a row of urinals, and behind them, a row of stalls. I avoided the stalls since my first day of school when I had wandered by mistake to the back, in search for a vacant urinal. The stench from the stalls was much worse than the urinals; once it got into your nose, it filled up your whole head, and then you smelled the stink all day. I hope that I would never have to go for number two at school. In the rainy season the floors were wet and slippery. I was afraid that I would skid and fall into foaming piss, into the churning, bubbling, smelly river of the urinals. There was a song called 'Yellow River' which was played very often on Radio Ceylon on the morning programme, Musical Clock. It was my brother's favourite programme. When that song came, he made the radio louder, and at once my father shouted, 'You want to make us all deaf or what, Edwin?' and my mother quickly went to make it soft. That song was special, said Edwin, it was very important because it was about the Vietnam war. North Vietnam was fighting with South Vietnam. I felt that that was worse than the India-China war. It would be like North India fighting with South India, my auntie and my cousins fighting me and my parents.

But every time I heard 'Yellow River' it reminded me of the stinking school bathroom. To make it worse, when your turn came, the boys waiting behind you in line pushed you in the small of your back and played the



fool, making the arc of the piss shake and swerve, and if you did not hold it skilfully, it wet your pants. This had happened once to me, and I had had to sit in class with the clammy cloth glued to my thigh, which first felt warm, and then because very cold. I felt so ashamed and miserable, and had to listen to all their teasing on top of it: 'Ask your mummy to aim it straight for you' or 'sit and do it, if your hole is like a girl's.' After that day, I waited till the rush in the bathroom finished before I went in, which was usually at the end of the short recess.

But my new friend, Dilip, helped me to find a safe spot. He was taller and stronger than I. He stood behind, guarding the rear. The whole thing was quicker now, and fifteen of the short recess's twenty minutes were saved for marbles.

Everyone who played marbles wanted my help. They believed that if I held their marbles, they would win. 'Tony's hand has magic,' they said, 'he brings good luck.' Someone who was in a higher standard called me Tony the Talisman, and from then on that was my nickname. But I had to look for the meaning in the dictionary.

I was able to choose who I would help, and I kept changing. Everyone said that was the fairest way of doing it, so the same fellow would not have good luck all the time. But I really did it because I had seen that the same fellow never kept winning. It was safer to work with the law of averages.

Lancelot Braganza who lived next door to us believed in the law of averages. He was once talking about Matka numbers to my father. They were standing outside by the stairs. He said he had a system. It was a safe system because it was based on the law of averages, he said. Then my father told me to go inside and not listen to big people discussing things unsuitable for children.

I wished that my marbles came in the real way, by playing and winning. But everyone believed in me now. They believed in me holding their marbles as much as my mother believed in lighting a candle at Mount Mary in Bandra. Even when someone lost, they did not blame me but found another reason.

The biscuit tin soon filled up. Now I could come home and sink my hand in it. The marbles rubbed against my fingers and slipped between them. It felt best when they touched the soft part at the bottom of the fingers, near the palm. When I first put my hand in the box, the marbles felt cool, but soon they became warmer and, after a while, wet and sticky with my sweat. This felt unpleasant and nice all at the same time. I could hear my father laughing and joking next door in Lancelot Braganza's flat, drinking that stinking *feni*. Later on there were always fights between my mother and my father. But the sound of marbles made the sound of shouting less ugly. And the angry faces of my parents disappeared behind the brilliant colours, as I thought about the day at school and all the marble-playing.



The game was best during long recess, which lasted a whole hour. I spent ten minutes on lunch and the rest with my marble-players. It used to take longer before, when my mother sent lunch with the tiffin-carrier. I had to find a place in the lunchroom, which sometimes took a while, and the rice was steaming and I had to blow on it, which took more time, but not as much as it would if I waited for it to cool by itself.

When my father came at night from Lancelot Braganza's flat, he always complained that the dinner was too hot. It was a waste of time, he said, to sit at the table and just wait for the food to cool enough so it would not burn his mouth. He said that not only time was wasted but also the gas, burning away while the food boiled and boiled, hotter and hotter.

Then my mother has started working at the export company because the money from piano-tuning wasn't enough. So she packed a dry lunch for me. I preferred it this way, sandwiches could be eaten standing anywhere on the playground.

Everyone at home was surprised that I had such a lot of marbles. I felt bad about telling how I got them. So when my father said to my mother, his voice sounding very proud, 'Well Maria, your son is becoming a crackshot marble player,' I did not say anything. It made me feel uncomfortable, like the hard collar of my new school uniform had last year, but which became softer and stopped bothering me after the *dhobi* washed it a few times. The undeserved praise also fit better after a while. I began enjoying it.

That year, marbles became more popular in school than they had ever been. It began to worry the school authorities. During a meeting of the P.T.A., someone said in a speech that 'the problem had assumed endemic proportions.' It was reported in the school's monthly newspaper. I did not always read that, but this time there was a whole page about the marble problem. There was some rubbish in the beginning, and then the good part:

During the recesses, the playground is populated by groups who gather around a triangle in the dust, or a rectangle for *khoibar*, or the *gull* dug in the ground, an inch in diameter and depth, for the simple and puerile routine of *Raja-Rani*. All faces are turned downwards, no one looks at the sky anymore; heaven has been repudiated for hell. The library and gymnasium, those noble institutions which nurture our youth for the more important things in life, and make them grow into the fine upstanding citizens which our country is so much in need of, are perpetually deserted. Other games like football, hockey, table-tennis, and badminton, which are indeed essential for the well-rounded development, are virtually forgotten. And even that prince of all games, that epitome of sportsmanship, which is not only an art but also a science, namely cricket, has passed out of favour.



The craze for marbles has ramifications outside the playground and beyond the short and long recesses. When the boys change classes between periods, filing out for P.T., or Visuals, or according to their choice of Gujarati or Marathi for Second Language, the corridors are filled with a new sound. The tramping of feet is accompanied by the jingling of marble-loaded pockets, and the air is coloured by a chhung-chhung rhythm.

This abomination must cease. This pastime of street urchins, this wasteful activity that is fit only to fill the time of the uneducated and the ignorant, is not worthy of the students of this great institution. Henceforth, the vile disease must be expunged, driven out from within these hallowed halls.

My boys, heed the call of your Alma Mater and your country. Turn again to the finer things in life which will stand by you faithfully, to steady your rudders and fill your sails as you voyage upon the sea of life. Abandon the craze for lowly things which do not help but hinder your growth. Relegate them again to the gutters from which they emerged.

I knew even before I finished reading that it was written by Father Varma, the Vice-Principal. He always used words like 'prince of games' and 'hallowed halls' and 'sea of life'. He wrote like this whenever something happened which he thought was a big problem that put the school in danger.

Sometimes, a marble fell by mistake in class, during pin-drop silence. It bounced away slowly into a corner. Marbles have a lazy way of bouncing, they always take their time, and this made the teacher more mad. The owner was the big winner that day, whose pockets were very full. He was sent to the Vice-Principal's office for a caning.

Father Varma did it with a ruler instead of the cane which stood in the corner behind his filing cabinet. Boys who had felt both said the ruler was worse, because Father Varma used the thin edge. Father Varma was from the untouchable class, it was whispered, and he had converted only to escape from it. We privately called him names like *bhunghi* and *harijan*. Some also said that he was a homo, and became a priest so he could be in a boys' school, where thrashing the boys gave him a sexy feeling.

But I was not sure whether to believe everything. Many of the Fathers and Brothers in the school were very strict. Most were vicious when it came to giving punishment, and Brother Tomas was the only one who laughed and joked with us. He was a red-faced Spaniard, in charge of collecting the fees. He also looked after the school's aquarium and the flock of stuffed animals. He had shot the animals himself. It was a strange mixture of duties, but he was a very strong man and could do it all. He was friendly with everyone. During the lunch break he came out on the playground and



talked to us. Sometimes he placed his hands flat on his head and let a boy hang from his upper arm, one on each side. He then made his muscles move up and down, so that the boy rose and fell with it. I had done this once and Brother Tomas's sweaty armpit had smelt like vinegar. Some of the senior boys joked that Father Varma did the same thing with his hard catholic cock, made a little kid hang from it and then waggled it.

I liked the sound of the words: catholic cock. They were dirty words, though, and I would never say them at home. But, like Tony the Talisman, the sound was nice.

Brother Tomas was the only one who did not mind the marbles. He even liked to watch. But he was not the man in charge. Father Lopez was the principal. He carried around with him a feather duster and the school keys in a hard leather key-case. If he found a boy that annoyed him, he lashed out with the handle-end of the feather duster or knocked him over the head with the leather key-case. Both could hurt very much. Boys who went to Hindi movies said that Father Lopez swung out just like the hero, Dev Anand, did. Every morning, in the stone quadrangle, he led the school prayer at the end of the daily assembly.

One morning, Father Lopez on his wooden platform, looking very tall and strict in his white cassock and black beard, made the sign of the cross to begin. Then the order of the assembly was broken by a marble bouncing on the stone floor. It went rat-a-tat-a-tat-a-tat without ending. It was followed by another, and another; some poor fellow's pocket had got a leak, and all his marbles were slipping out. He tried very hard to stop them but couldn't. He grabbed his pocket from outside, then put his hand inside the pocket to catch the marbles, but it was no use. All went falling on the stone floor.

'The stupid goat whose marbles are falling will come forward right now!' Father Lopez's voice became very shrill. He reached in his cassock for the key-case. The boy left his position and moved slowly to Father Lopez's platform. He was trembling. But the marbles kept falling rat-a-tat-a-tat-a-tat on the stone floor.

'Stop the noise, you goat!' yelled Father Lopez, 'walk faster unless you want to walk out the school gate and never return!' The boy hurried. Then he slowed down and tried to stop the marbles. He slipped his hand up his short pants to find the hole, but he was trembling and couldn't. He hurried again. When he reached the platform, the last marble slipped out at Father Lopez's feet.

'You stupid goat!' said Father Lopez, and raised the leather key-case. But with his arm in mid-air he stopped. He looked just like a film poster of Dev Anand, except for his cassock and beard. The marbles were still bouncing.

'Silly donkeys!' Father Lopez addressed the whole assembly, lowering



his arm. 'Standing and staring like owls! Catch those marbles and stop the noise! Shameless creatures!' We ran after the bouncing marbles. They were all captured and turned over to Father Lopez. The assembly was dismissed after the school prayer, except for that boy who was taken to the Principal's office.

And that same day, a new rule was announced. All the masters and teachers were told to read the notice aloud to their classes: 'No boy is allowed to carry more than five marbles in his pocket. Anyone suspected of breaching the rule may be searched by a teacher or Father or Brother at any time. Punishment will be confiscation of all marbles, caning by Father Varma or Father Lopez, and writing, in neat longhand, one thousand times: I will not carry more than five marbles in my pocket.'

The new rule made it difficult. And now at home, too, my marbles were not welcome. Suddenly everything was changed. When my mother gave me more biscuit tins to fill, my father said, 'Don't encourage the boy, enough is enough.' He did not talk about me anymore with pride in his voice.

'What will you do with them all?' he asked me. 'There are more important things than marbles.'

'But I'm a champion player,' I said. The lie came easily. 'I could win the world title.'

'There's no such thing. Champion nuisance these boxes are becoming, that is all,' he grumbled. 'If you lose one on the floor someone will slip on it and break their head, I'm telling you.'

'I'll be very careful.'

'Marbles will not feed your stomach. Champion at studies is what you need to be.'

I wondered if there really was a World Marble Championship. But no one at school knew for sure. We didn't even know if they played marbles in foreign countries. Maybe if the Indian Government made it the national sport, it might begin to spread everywhere.

My father complained more as the boxes grew in number. Then my mother also took his side.

'I didn't want to say it in the beginning,' she said, 'but marbles bring bad luck. They are as bad as peacock feathers and seashells, never keep them in the house.'

'That is right,' said my father. 'I know what you are saying. Old man Furtado next door told me, the year before he died, about a family in Panjim that was completely destroyed for this reason. When they got rid of the seashells, things began to get better.'

Everyone hated marbles. In school, and at home. Why they were against such beautiful things, I could not understand. But I did not pay much attention because the problem in school was bigger.



My friends were wondering what to do with their marbles. For a few days everyone followed the new rule, which was no fun. Then I showed them how to wrap the marbles in a hanky and knot the ends tight to make a little pouch. The marbles sat inside without room to move and rattle. Now all the boys who used to think it was sissy to carry a handkerchief got one everyday. They made their mothers very happy.

Father Lopez was also very happy because the jingle and jangle in classes and corridors stopped, and no one had to be searched or caned.

Marble-playing started again, and my collection began to grow fast. I spent my time in the evening after school sorting the marbles and counting them. I kept in a separate box the brilliant ones with coloured centres, with curvy swervy squiggles. They were wonderful to look at against the light, and roll between my finger and thumb. Their coloured insides were of different shapes and sizes, and I could imagine them to be anything I wanted, like I did with clouds. The completely transparent ones were called sodas, because that's what they looked like, with tiny bubbles inside, like sodawater.

A few weeks after the new school rule, my father began spending more time at home. He told my mother, 'Don't worry what will happen, Maria. Only one piano today.' She was home early because the export company was cutting down overtime. All this with devaluation was terrible, they said. So much bad luck could only have one explanation.

'We were right about the marbles,' he said to her. I was in the next room. 'What to do, just throw them away?'

'Maybe talk to him about what is happening because of the marbles.'

'You think he will listen? Your son does not understand. All these days I'm telling him, give some attention to your studies also, but it is like I'm just a dog barking in the night.'

Then I couldn't hear anymore because I opened my favourite box and put my hand inside. The marbles rolled around and rubbed against my fingers and I took a handful and shook them, then let them trickle into the box, listening to their sound.

Suddenly something touched my shoulder. It really scared me and I jumped and dropped the box on the floor. It made a loud crash and all the marbles went scattering and bouncing around the room.

My mother felt bad about scaring me, so to cover it up she started scolding: 'You didn't hear me talking to you when I came in?'

My father heard the crash and came running. He saw the marbles bouncing towards him. He jumped to one side and clung to the cupboard in the room, as if they were attacking him.

'See? I told you this would happen,' he shouted, half-angry and half-worried. 'You children don't understand when your parents tell you



nicely. You want me to slip on them and break my leg? Hurting it on that stupid broken-up pavement outside was not enough?

It was a long time after which he had mentioned that again. He had been so unhappy when the pavement outside our building was stolen. The flat stones were taken away and it was never fixed, although he still kept hoping that one day it would. It was covered with mud and little pebbles, all rough and uneven. But it was more fun like this, because now the street sweeper did not clean it every morning, and I found interesting things buried in the dust, like bottle caps from soda or beer, and different kinds of cigarette butts. And at Diwali, the little red firecrackers which smelled of gunpowder. Like a certain type of fart, that smell was, although there was more variety with farts. Faredoon Irani in my class would let one out, then say, 'Hardboiled eggs! Hardboiled eggs!' and make us all smell it. Like most Irani boys, he was very tough, and we obeyed him.

I went chasing after the marbles but it was no use. There were too many of them, and it seemed to me as though they knew what they were doing and had made up their minds which way to go. They bounced their way into the other room, past the kitchen and the stoves, past the dining table, and under the crucifix hanging on the wall beside the table, which my father looked at every time he left the house. Actually, we were all supposed to look at the crucifix before going out, but sometimes I forgot, till my mother pointed to it.

The door leading into the hallway was open, and the marbles found their way. We followed them.

Then they began to cascade down the stairs. So many marbles all bouncing down the hollow wooden stairs made a great noise. The din brought out Lancelot Braganza from the flat next door. He said to my father, 'Hey Des, man what is happening?'

'Tony's box of marbles finally fell,' said he. 'I was warning all the time this would happen, but nobody was listening.'

'Ah, don't worry too much about it,' said Lancelot, going inside again, 'more important things in life.' He always said this. Whenever something bad happened, he said this to make things cheerful. I wondered if he really meant it or if it was just a way of talking. Like Mr. Lalvani the Punjabi. And nine running.

I slipped past my parents who were blocking the doorway, and started to follow the marbles down the stairs. But the staircase was dark. My father yelled out, 'Tony, stop! You'll break your head!' Those steps were really dangerous. I leaned over the railing, and could tell by the sound that the marbles had just reached the passage downstairs. They were now zig-zagging through the wooden poles and beams that supported the broken ceiling.



Then they must have rolled down the front steps and out into the dust of the pavement because they were silent all of a sudden.

We went inside, and my father said, 'Enough has happened. All the marble boxes will have to go. You decide how. Give them to your friends, sell them, burn them, anything. But after one week I don't want to see any marbles in the house.'

That night I lay in bed thinking of the lost marbles. When everyone was asleep, I got up and went to the balcony. I walked on tiptoe past all the beds. Alice had rolled hers out from under mine, and she was snoring under her blanket. Edwin was on the sofa-cum-bed which creaked loudly every time he turned. My parents would never understand what the marbles meant to me. When they were all gone, I would have to find some other way to spend the time in the evenings.

I looked out in the night. The street was dark and quiet. The building across the road was dark, too, except for one window. Someone was moving behind the curtain, but I could not tell what they were doing. In a few moments that window also went black. I looked at the sky. There were no stars in it. Sometimes, when my father came back from drinking *feni* with Lancelot Braganza, he would be in a good mood. It was strange how the same stuff could make good moods and bad moods. His mouth would smell but his voice would be soft and kind and he would not yell at anyone. Once, he had sat with me on the balcony and said that when he was a little boy, there was never a night which was not brilliant with stars. His father (your grandfather, he explained) would sit with him, like we were sitting, and they would look at the sky, and grandfather would point out Venus and Jupiter. Now everything had changed, said my father, and the stars and planets were so disgusted with the way life was in Bombay, they had disappeared from the sky, and he did not blame them, he would disappear too if he could. His voice was shaking, and it was very sad. It made me feel funny, but luckily his voice stopped shaking.

Remembering that, I looked down at the pavement. I thought I must be dreaming, because it was shining and sparkling as though covered with a million stars. I rubbed my eyes, then looked again. It was still sparkling, like a tray of jewellery in the window of Vithaldas Jewellers. I used to pass that shop on my way to school everyday.

I wanted to wake my parents so they could look too at how the ruined pavement had changed. It was so wonderful. Then I thought it better to wait till the morning.

I stood there for a long, long time, and don't remember going to bed. I don't remember falling asleep either. Maybe I fell asleep standing at the balcony railing and then walked in my sleep to the bed.

In the morning I told them about the pavement. But I was too excited, so I don't think I described it properly. And anyway, to describe something so wonderful was difficult.



My father said, 'Rubbish. I agree it was beautiful once, before the crooks stole it. Only way it can be wonderful again is if the finely-fitted polished slabs come back.' Then, 'Your son is going crazy, or he had a nice dream,' he added to my mother, as if I was not there.

But I insisted it was true, so they went to the window. Only a few jagged gleams from bits of broken glass came now and then through the dusty stones and pebbles. I was puzzled. Then the sun went behind a cloud, and there was nothing.

'Imagination, a boy's imagination,' said my father. 'I'm not saying that is a bad thing. But it is good to know it for what it is. And it is still one week for all the marble boxes to go, that has not changed.'

He put on his solar hat, picked up his black briefcase, checking inside it, and left to tune pianos. I said to my mother, 'I wasn't dreaming, I really saw it. I think you have to wait for the darkness.'

She promised that that night she would bring him to the window to look at the pavement.

In the evening, when dusk fell and the street had quieted, I emptied another box of marbles onto the pavement.

Later, when I was in my pyjamas, waiting for all the buildings on the street to go to sleep, my parents came.

'Okay, now where is that wonderful pavement?' said my father, willing to humour me. Tonight he had not been next door with Lancelot Braganza. The hard lines which the *feni* caused to grow downward from the corners of his mouth were not there.

We went to the balcony. But there was nothing. He turned to my mother with a what-did-I-say look. I said, 'You have to wait for a few more minutes.'

She squeezed his hand to make him go along with it. She thought I didn't see that. We kept looking at the pavement three stories below.

It started to happen. A few twinkles first, then some more, and finally the whole pavement was sparkling as though covered with diamonds. It was shining and glittering in the darkness with a beauty that was, as my father said later, otherworldly.

Then the scene started to fade. We looked up. The moon was disappearing behind a cloud. I turned to my parents, and their eyes were shining. Mine must have been, too, because of the way they were looking at me.

'Yes,' said my father, with something in his throat, 'it's beautiful.' He put his arms around me and my mother, then we waited for the moon to reappear. When it sailed out in the open, the stars began to twinkle again in the pavement.

'Go quick,' said my father, 'call our brother and sister.'

I ran to get Edwin and Alice from their beds. The sofa-cum-bed made a loud groan as he got up. Alice came with her blanket over her shoulders.



My mother always said the girl was crazy, using it all of the year's three hundred and sixty-five days, even the hot season. They both came grumbling, wondering what their father was up to now. Then they looked, and were not sleepy anymore.

Each time the moon went behind a cloud, we waited patiently for it to emerge. When it was close to time for the moon to set and the sun to rise, and we could no longer keep our eyes open, we went to bed. It was almost morning and we could not sleep too long, but we did not feel exhausted.

The school's annual Prize Distribution Day was to be held on that Friday. Brand new books were given as prizes. Edwin had won many when he was in school. They were still in the showcase with glass doors, alongside the good coffee set we had never used and the glass hen whose top you could lift and the bottom was a bowl in which my mother kept her sewing things. The brand new books had a nice smell. The function always took place on the school's playground, where chairs were placed for the parents and guests. I decided to do the same thing for the playground that had happened to the pavement. That would get rid of the marbles, like my father wanted me to, and give the Prize Distribution a beauty that was otherworldly.

On Friday, I packed my school bag with the remaining boxes of marbles. To get them all in, I had to leave behind some of my books. If the teacher had discovered this, I would have been done for. But as long as I had some open textbook on my desk and pretended to pay attention, she did not bother me.

When all the periods were over, we went down the stairs. Father Lopez stood at the bottom with his feather duster. His hands were behind his back, and the feather duster kept twitching, you could see it as it came and went behind his cassock. He liked the boys to come down in a straight line. Then I went to the bathroom. A few minutes had to pass before I could sneak back up. Once, my marble friend, Dilip, had returned to class after the last bell because he had forgotten something in his desk. The Science master and the English teacher were inside. They were rubbing against each other, and his hands were on her bum. They said nothing, and Dilip left without taking what he had come for. His life was a misery ever after during English and Science, and I did not want this to happen to me.

But on Prize Distribution Day no one stayed around too long. Teachers wanted to go home, get ready, and come back looking *chickna* for the function. The corridor outside my classroom was empty. I took out the boxes from my bag and began turning them over outside the window, careful to keep my head inside. I also looked over my shoulder now and then. First the coloured ones went, then the sodas. It was like emptying a bottle of sodawater. My father used to send me to buy sodawater at the Irani restaurant. He preferred Rogers Soda, but if that was out of stock I



had to buy Duke's. He used to mix it in the *feni*. But he also drank soda-water by itself when he had a gas problem. Sometimes he stayed awake all night because of it.

After four boxes were empty, there was a peculiar sound. Like rain falling on a tin roof. That was strange. There should be no sound if the marbles were landing on the dirt surface of the playground. I continued, and so did the noise. Then there were some voices shouting; one sounded like Father Lopez's.

I looked out slowly, a little scared, and at once knew what was going on. My timing was unlucky. The school's six buses had their garages at one end of the playground. They were loaded and leaving when I began to empty the marbles. The noise sounding like rain on tin roofs to me was like thunder to the occupants. Some of the marbles crashed into the windshields and windows. The boys told me later that they rode home in buses with stars that gleamed in sunlight, and when they looked out at the streets, all the buildings and cars and people looked broken and disjointed. It was a lot of fun, they said. One thing was sure, my marbles were changing the way things looked, wherever I threw them.

But when I heard Father Lopez's voice, I had to run. One box of marbles remained. I stuffed it back in my bag and ran downstairs to the school's front gate, while Father Lopez was busy at the back. I hoped he would be pleased later, at night, when he saw how beautiful the playground looked.

The function started at six-thirty, and it was still light. I waited for the sky to darken. Then the moon would appear and make the playground as heavenly as my pavement. I didn't tell my parents anything, I wanted it to be a surprise.

But after darkness came, there was no change. Instead, Father Lopez made a special speech: 'Today, we might have been in the midst of a calamity instead of celebrating our annual Prize Distribution Day. Today, after school, some irresponsible student threw thousands of marbles from a window upstairs onto this playground and gravely damaged our fleet of school buses. But apart from the damage, imagine, dear parents, the consequences if the situation had not been remedied in time. Imagine, if you will, so many of us slipping and sliding on the marbles, and falling and sustaining all manner of injuries. But thanks to my gallant crew: the *mali* and the sweepers and every available hand, including the teachers who had not yet left, the day was saved. They scoured the playground for the scattered marbles. They made the playground safe again for you, for your children, and for our annual Prize Distribution Day. And we all thank them from the bottom of our hearts.' There was a lot of clapping.

When I tried very hard, I was able to see a few far-flung sparkles, the ones missed by Father Lopez's gallant cleaning crew, but only because I knew what to look for. No one else could have noticed them.



Feeling very disappointed, I went home with my parents. My father said, 'I hope that at least one time before you finish school you will go up on that stage. Every year Edwin used to win something. He has some silly ideas now, wanting to change from Science to Arts. But in school he was a top student. For General Science or Algebra or something. Always at least one prize.'

I was quiet. My mother said, 'He will study harder now. You will no, Tony? Once the marbles are all gone, you will do it.'

'Can we stand on the balcony tonight?' I asked her.

'We'll see,' said my father. 'Your mother and I are very tired. If we feel better later, maybe.'

I emptied the last box outside the window. If the others did not want to, I would stand alone and watch the pavement.

When it was late at night and I was the only one awake, I went to the balcony. I wished my parents and brother and sister were with me to share it. How could they have seen it once and then not wanted to see it again?

While I wondered, my parents came in. My father said, pretending to be annoyed, 'Some bright bloody light is shining in the window, woke me up. No rest even when I'm so tired.'

But as we watched, all his tiredness left him. I could tell by the way he was standing and the way his head and shoulders were that he was feeling strong again. Then he said, 'This is so wonderful, it feels like there is beautiful singing somewhere inside, in my head or something.'

My mother said, 'Yes, I am feeling the same way.'

Soon Edwin and Alice came. They said that it sounded as if someone was playing music in the quiet night and the sound had woken them up. They came to the window and began watching with us.

Many hours later when the moonlight became faint, we went to bed, tired and yet feeling fresh. This was the part that made me wonder the most. As if we had not really been standing at the window but sleeping peacefully and dreaming about it.

And when we woke up, no one talked about it, there was no need to. In the evening, my mother came home from the export company and said that overtime was back to normal, no restrictions, and my father said he had good news too, lots of tuning appointments were booked for him in the coming weeks. That night we stood again on the balcony.

Almost a month after I had dropped the first box of marbles, the pavement began to change. It did not sparkle like it used to, even though the moon was now almost full again. There were large gaps where it remained dark, places where only a few scattered gleams could be seen.

Next morning I went downstairs early, before anyone was up. Outside, a man was scavenging, and I realized what had happened to the pavement.

I wanted to speak to the man, and beg him to leave the remaining



marbles in the rubble. But he looked at me so threateningly that I changed my mind. His clothes were torn and he had a dirty beard which had things sticking in it. His nails were long and black and curling. They must not have been cut for years. When my mother cut my nails, she wrapped them in a piece of paper and got rid of them very secretly. She said that if someone found them, they could use them for black magic and do evil to the person from whose fingers the nails came.

That man looked so scary with his long nails that I did not say anything to him. I just returned upstairs quietly.

That night, we gathered on the balcony for the last time. After staring at the pavement, which was now just a broken, sorry surface like before, we went to bed, feeling very tired.

In the morning, for the first time we began to talk about the pavement. We began to talk of what we had lost, of the beauty that shone in the dark, and of the magical way it would start to sparkle when the moon edged out from behind a cloud, and how gradually the whole pavement would be lit as though with a thousand tiny twinkling lights. First my father described it, and then my mother had her turn, and then Edwin, Alice, and me.

Although we spoke of the same thing, each of us described it differently, with our own words, and we enjoyed listening to what each one had to say. We also talked about how wonderful we would feel at the end when we finally went to bed, how we felt strength and joy, and now we would not have that anymore.

But a strange thing was happening.

As we talked about it and remembered it all, the same gladness came back to our hearts, and our spirits were uplifted, even more greatly than when we had actually stood before the window. This happened from now on, every time, when we sat and talked about the pavement.